Many teachers of English Language in Singapore have complained to me that they are unsure about many of the grammatical items which they themselves are required to teach.

Although there are numerous grammar books on the market today, my experience is that teachers rarely refer to these. Perhaps teachers feel they are too complex. Moreover they may feel that the book concentrates merely on classifying and labelling syntactic structures without clearly bringing out the uses of the structures together with examples.

The aim of this article is to remedy this situation; firstly to simplify wherever possible and secondly to indicate the major uses of the structures together with examples.

Many structural grammars of the past have concentrated solely on categorising and labelling structural patterns. Modern functional grammars, however, not only describe the forms but also describe the various uses. This functional approach to describing language should be of great value to language teachers and language learners. For example, both teacher and learners may already know the form of the present perfect (has/have + past participle) but they may not be sure about the functions/uses (i.e. when do you use the present perfect?).

We already know that one form may have more than one function, e.g. ‘Can’ for permission, ‘Can’ for ability, etc. As we shall see, the reverse is also true, that one function will be realised by more than one form. For teaching purposes, it may be useful in the initial stages, especially, to link one form with one function. The selection of a particular function will obviously depend on factors such as utility, frequency, etc.

I have limited the scope of this grammar to features of the verb group since it is so complex and since error analysis studies have shown that second language learners make the majority of mistakes in this area. A lot of remedial teaching, therefore
(perhaps following on from composition lessons), will concentrate on the verbs of English.

By the term ‘verb’ I do not mean ‘a doing word or an action work’ (a popular but fallacious definition\(^1\)). I refer to a structural item which can fit in the slot

\[
\text{John } \underline{} \text{ the dog}
\]

and has the characteristic of +s or +ed. (to be referred to throughout this article as STEM + s, STEM + ed, etc.).

THE GRAMMAR

The normal approach to classifying verbs is to first discover whether they are finite or non-finite.

e.g. \[\begin{array}{cc}
\text{FINITE} & \text{NON-FINITE} \\
\text{I want} & \text{to go.} \\
\text{I can} & \text{go.} \\
\end{array}\]

Finite verbs are capable of change

e.g. \[\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{I want} & \rightarrow & \text{I wanted} \\
\text{I can} & \rightarrow & \text{I could} \\
\end{array}\]

Non-finite verbs do not change

e.g. \[\begin{array}{c}
\text{I want to go} \\
\rightarrow \text{goes} \\
\rightarrow \text{went} \\
\end{array}\]

\text{TENSE} is a grammatical description of the finite verb. Tense should not, therefore, be confused with the concept of time (past, present, future).

The finite verb has three position forms: I want

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{He wants} \\
\text{He wanted} \\
\end{array}
\]

\(^1\) For example, in the sentence ‘Swimming is an energetic sport’ which exactly are the doing or action words? Certainly not the verb!

\(^2\) indicates unacceptable forms.
From this we can see that there are two tenses in English,

PRESENT  I want, He wants
PAST He wanted

Note: There is no future tense in English. There are, however, different ways of referring to future time.

ASPECT refers to whether a verb is simple or continuous, perfect or non-perfect.

Therefore, by incorporating tense and aspect we may have

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRESENT</th>
<th>(PERFECT)</th>
<th>SIMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PAST</td>
<td>CONTINUOUS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Verbs may either be dynamic or stative. Dynamic verbs generally refer to actions or activities and may become continuous in aspect. Stative verbs, however, do not typically take the continuous aspect. These include

VERBS OF PERCEPTION: e.g. see, smell, taste, feel, hear.

I can see you  *I am seeing you
That smells nice  NOT  *That is smelling nice

VERBS REFERRING TO A STATE OF MIND OR FEELING e.g. believe, dislike, doubt, hate, imagine, hope, forget, prefer, know, like, remember, suppose, understand, want.

I hope you’re right  *I am hoping you’re right
I remember her  NOT  *I am remembering her
I understand you  *I am understanding you

VERBS REFERRING TO A RELATIONSHIP OR STATE OF BEING e.g. belong to, cost, consist of, fit, involve, owe, own, remain, require, have, resemble, equal

This belongs to me  *This is belonging to me
It costs 40¢  NOT  *It is costing 40¢
I have a cold  *I am having a cold(1)

(1) sometimes heard in Singapore English, however.
PRESENT TENSE SIMPLE

FORMS

STEM e.g. play
STEM + s plays

FUNCTIONS/USES

: General function = description in the present

1 ACTUAL
   IMMEDIATE
   This news comes to you from S.B.C.
   She wants her coffee black.

2 NEUTRAL/
   /GENERAL
   TRUTHS
   Oil floats on water.
   Coconuts grow in Malaysia.

3 HABITUAL
   I usually shower twice a day.
   I eat a banana every day.

4 FUTURE
   REFERENCE
   The train arrives at 6.00 tomorrow.
   Today is Monday, tomorrow is Tuesday.

5 PAST
   'IMMEDIATE'
   She tells me you've been here before.

PRESENT TENSE CONTINUOUS

FORM

: 'BE' + STEM+ing e.g. playing

FUNCTIONS/USES

: General function of all verbs, present or past, perfect or non-perfect, taking the continuous aspect = limited duration.

1 TEMPORARY
   PRESENT
   Mary is being a good girl.
   I'm taking fencing lessons this month.
Next week the S.S.O. are playing Shostakovitch. We’re having nasi goreng for lunch.

He’s always boasting. You’re always complaining.

PRESENT TENSE PERFECT

**FORMS**

- ‘HAVE’ + STEM+en (past participle)
  - e.g. has taken
- ‘HAVE’ + ‘BEEN’ + STEM+ing
  - e.g. has been taking

**FUNCTIONS/USES**

1. **PRESENT INTEREST IN EVENTS**
   - I’ve seen Anita Sarawak this morning.
   - (v. I saw Anita Sarawak this morning [incidentally]).

2. **INDEFINITE TIME REFERENCE**
   - ‘Have you read “Roots” (recently)?’
   - (v. ‘Did you read “Roots” [last week]?’)

3. **PAST UP TO THE PRESENT**
   - I’ve lived in Jurong for five years.
   - (v. I lived in Jurong for five years. [no longer there]).

Simple vs. Continuous

1. **COMPLETEDNESS/INCOMPLETEDNESS**
   - She has eaten my sweets. (all gone)
   - She has been eating my sweets. (some left)
PAST TENSE SIMPLE

FORM: STEM + ed  eg. played

FUNCTIONS/USES: General functions = Narrative and description in the past.

1 NARRATIVE  He got up from the chair, went to the cupboard, opened the drawer and took out a pistol.

ACTUAL  She wore a yellow jacket and proudly displayed two diamond rings.

NEUTRAL  Dinosaurs lived in swampy, primeval jungles.

HABITUAL  All his life, he never spoke to his father.

3 HYPOTHESES  I wish you were here now. If I were you, I would learn to keep quiet.

PAST TENSE CONTINUOUS

FORM: 'BE' (PAST) + STEM+ing  e.g. was playing
Functions/Uses

1 Denoting Temporary Duration & Actions Not Necessarily Completed

- He was working in C.K. Tang's six months ago.
- The poor girl was drowning. (vs. The poor girl drowned)

2 Denoting Activity Begun But Not Finished, i.e. Still In Progress

- When I entered the room, they were (already) eating.
- At 12.00 they were playing tennis.

Past Tense Perfect

Forms:

- 'HAD' + STEM+en (past participle)
  - e.g. had taken

- 'HAD' + 'BEEN' + STEM+ing
  - e.g. had been taking

Functions/Uses

1 Past In The Past

- The house had been empty for a month.
- He had forgotten to bring an umbrella.
- It had been raining.

2 Reporting Past Events

- He said that he had been too tired.
- She asked what he had done that day.

3 Describing One Event Preceding Another

- After he had paid the bill, he left the restaurant.
- When the teacher had left, the children started talking.
Notes: 1) For functions 2 & 3, the past perfect is not obligatory: the past simple could have been used instead.

2) Also the common rule "you use the past perfect when there are two actions in the past and one preceded the other" only applies when there is a subordinate clause (a clause beginning with "when" or "after"). You do not say, *I had paid the bill and left the restaurant*.

REFERENCES


Elliott, A, Errors in English, Singapore: (in draft)